

RACCOON HOUND HUNTERS FOCUS GROUP MEETING SUMMARY NOVEMBER 15, 2007; ROANOKE, VIRGINIA

GROUP PROFILE

The Raccoon Hound Hunter focus group took place on November 15, 2007, in Roanoke, VA, as part of a statewide effort to identify and evaluate issues of concern related to hound hunting in the state. Approximately fifteen people were invited to attend this focus group meeting. Invitees were selected because they had previously contacted the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (VDGIF) and expressed an interest in participating, because they had some involvement in hound hunting issues in the past, or because they were leaders in the hound hunting community; invitees resided primarily in western and central Virginia. The focus group meeting was attended by seventeen hunters; all were white males. All of the individuals present hunted raccoon; three also hunt bear, four hunt deer, one hunts squirrel, and one hunts opossum. Participants indicated that dogs were used for bear and deer hunting. One participant identified himself as a bowhunter and another individual identified himself as a landowner and asserted that, as a result, he understood both sides of the issue.

Nearly all of the individuals present held leadership positions in various hunting, kennel, and sportsmen's groups or clubs. Although the views expressed at this focus group meeting and reported in this summary only represent the participating individuals, it is informative to know the breadth of interests involved. Participants were affiliated with the UKC, AKC, Virginia Bowhunters Association, Southwest Virginia Coon Hunters Federation, county hunt clubs, and various kennel clubs. During introductions, three participants noted their long history of 'coon hunting, having participated in the activity for sixty, fifty-six, and forty years, respectively. A majority of the participants indicated that they participate in competition hunting, either as contestants or officials.

FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY

The focus group was conducted for approximately two hours. During that time, participants responded to a series of questions posed by the facilitator (in bold, below). A summary of responses is provided below, including direct quotes from meeting participants that help to illustrate any common themes or key points from the discussion.

How important is hound hunting for you compared to other types of hunting or recreation that you and your family take part in?

All participants expressed a passion and love for 'coon hunting. Most have been engaged in 'coon hunting for most of their lives and participate in the activity with family and close friends and gain from it a sense of heritage, fellowship, and self-identity. Participants also indicated that 'coon hunting allows them to relax, spend time in the outdoors, and meet others. Nearly all participants indicated that training, running, and time with the dogs themselves was a crucial component of the activity.

“There is a lot of good fellowship in ‘coon huntin’. Be out there in the night, look at the stars, and make you appreciate what’s going on in the world....The fellowship of it is a lot too, you know, as much as the hunting itself. I like to hear the hounds work.”

“My granddaddy hunted; both bear and ‘coon, so did my dad. I’ve never known life without a hound or hunting a dog. I’ve turkey hunted, deer hunted; hunted everything that there is to hunt at one time or another. I enjoy ‘coon hunting more than any of it.”

“Perhaps it’s because I’m in my waning years, but it’s become my reason for being....I guess the only real passion I ever had in my life was praying and young hounds.”

What are the two or three most important aspects of hunting with hounds to you?

As with the previous question, participants identified the fellowship, friendship, and camaraderie as important aspects of hound hunting. In addition, participants indicated that the competition hunting helps develop a sense of community and also helps raise money for charitable causes.

“I think you can look right around this room and everybody here’s been someone you knew, someone in your community that’s got cancer or got sick.... And it might not be a national event, but the local club put on a benefit hunt and all that money went to that family to help pay their medical bills.”

Participants noted that ‘coon hunting is unique from other hound hunting activities because 1) it takes place at night and 2) they only use a few dogs (i.e. they are not pack hunters).

“I think the important thing that people don’t realize....it’s done at night. It’s a physical sport. We don’t turn ten, fifteen hounds out. Our hounds, these dogs, are highly bred and expensive. Nobody here has a dog he wouldn’t sell, probably, if he had a top hound, wouldn’t price it, much less than twenty-five hundred or five thousand dollars....We’re not carrying twenty-five or thirty dogs; we’re not pack hunting. We take two or three dogs out, concentrated....Our position is that we are unique and we’ve got to maintain that uniqueness....My fear is that in this situation that...coon hounds will be swept up in the same venue as deer hounds, fox hounds, and stuff. Our position is that we want to maintain what we’ve got.”

What do you believe to be the most important issues facing hunters who use hounds today?

Participants identified the right to retrieve and the changing demographics of rural Virginia as the two most important issues facing hound hunters. Participants indicated that the right to retrieve law was particularly crucial for raccoon hound hunters because they are hunting at night and requesting permission from landowners at those hours is difficult and uncomfortable. In addition, they indicated that a greater prevalence of absentee landowners further complicates the process of obtaining permission to retrieve a dog on private land.

“The right to retrieve is far more important to a coon hunter than any daylight man. I don’t have any problem going up and knocking on anybody’s door in the daytime, but I dislike having to knock on somebody’s door at 2:30 in the morning. I don’t think he’s going to like it either.”

“...lands we had rights to hunt on is being bought up or posted: you can’t hunt. Which makes our hunting areas fewer, and fewer, and fewer.”

Participants indicated that problems related to the right to retrieve and access to land, for hunting in general, varied across the state. Some participants live in areas with a high percentage of National Forest land and experienced fewer frustrations with access. Some participants expressed a desire for National Forest land to be available during raccoon chase season. Participants in eastern Virginia and other parts of the state with a predominance of private land, indicated greater frustration and higher incidence of conflict. In general, participants indicated that landownership patterns have shifted from larger to smaller parcels and also from long-time to new or absentee landowners. In general, participants felt that landowners were “less neighborly” than in the past. Another change identified by participants is that, increasingly, homeowners are feeding pets outdoors—on back porches or other areas close to the home. Raccoons frequent these “free meals” and, subsequently, ‘coon hunting dogs follow the trail to areas where they are not welcome.

What do you think is the most appropriate way to deal with those issues?

The participants identified education as one of the primary ways hound hunters and the VDGIF can begin to deal with issues related to the right to retrieve and hunting access, in general. Participants felt that personal communication with newer landowners might help familiarize them with hound hunters, dispel myths or misconceptions about the activity, and build a foundation for positive interactions in the future.

“Some way or another we going to have to be able to communicate with those people to let them know exactly what we are. If we have to, go introduce ourselves to them and explain to them exactly what it is and that they have nothing to fear. You know, if it’s in your neighborhood or someplace close by where you’re hunting, that you have permission to hunt. You know, go talk to them people....I think that might be one of the things we have to do.”

Another potential solution to some of the issues surrounding the right to retrieve that participants identified was for raccoon houndsmen to formalize a “code of ethics” or “code of conduct”, based on familiar courteous practices.

“Maybe we need to develop and get out there a Coon Hunters Code of Ethics where you do go in with your light on and you are willing to meet the landowner if he wants to turn his light on and, you know...everybody in here knows what everybody’s talking about. It’s just a matter of formulating a plan that will do some good.”

There was some discussion about the participants' displeasure about the Hound Hunting Study. They expressed skepticism about the need for the Study and fear that the outcome of the Study will reduce opportunity for hound hunting, not just in Virginia and not just for 'coon hunting.

In the areas where you hunt, have you seen any changes over the last 10 years in availability of lands for hunting with hounds? If you have seen changes, were they related to changes in land ownership, changes in attitudes of land owners, a combination of the two, or other factors?

Participants acknowledged that Virginia's landscape is changing. Participants noted that parcel size is getting smaller and attitudes of landowners are changing; becoming increasingly less supportive of hunting. They noted that it is primarily the smaller landowner who doesn't like hunting and, further, increases the chances for conflict by feeding pets outdoors. In addition, participants believed that access to public land has diminished as access gates are closed after big game season. These changes have resulted in fewer places to hunt and increased conflicts with landowners who are anti-hunting. Participants noted that they are willing to travel to hunt, especially to keep themselves and their dogs out of harm's way.

"Very few 300, 500, 600 acre landowners care for you hunting. It's those people on the corner where you turn in or your dog trees. If they wouldn't be so nice with their scraps and feeding the cats on the back porch the coons wouldn't even be there."

Participants discussed how 'coon hunters are a minority among hound hunters. They pointed out that there are only two publications that frequently deal with 'coon hunting and few, if any, programs on outdoor television programs ever cover 'coon hunting. Participants were concerned that 'coon hunters would be lumped with other types of hound hunters. Further, they were concerned that the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries has not, in the past demonstrated a sufficient level of support for hound hunting

Participants also discussed the conflict between deer hunters who do not use hounds and hound hunters. Several felt like the VDGIF shows preference to these hunters. Many noted that hunters who do not use hounds do not like hound hunters. One participant has curtailed his hunting to avoid conflict.

"Up here we have two weeks of rifle season. There's not many of us even 'coon hunt for them two weeks because the deer hunter's out there. Let them have the woods. 'Cause if you loose a dog, something happens, it's too big a risk to your dogs."

What do you think is the most appropriate way to deal with those issues?

Participants suggested that polite communication and efforts to develop relationships with landowners might be the best way to address concerns, given the changing nature of Virginia's landscape and rural residents. Others suggested that avoiding places where hound hunting is not welcome should also be considered.

“If I go in and introduce yourself and tell the people what you’re doing, and those things right there and making sure, you know, that they know who you are or that I live down here or I live such and such. If that don’t do it, then I’m not smart enough to figure it out.”

“If you get in an area where somebody says they don’t want you, then stay out. Don’t cause trouble....People who don’t do that cause us problems.”

Participants noted that there are a small percentage of ‘coon hunters who are likely causing problems for the entire group. They suggested that ‘coon hunters could make greater efforts to encourage others to act responsibly, especially impressing on new hunters the need to be courteous.

“As a group of coon hunters we need to talk to the others or impose upon those that are the two percent to maybe step up their game a little bit and try to avoid confrontations and don’t jump out and say ‘well I got a right to go get my dog’. Explain that you’re going to go quietly and quickly and try to keep the situation as low keyed as you can.”

“Education, again, and communication and communication to the public. If they don’t know what’s going on, they can assume anything.”

Participants suggested that the VDGIF could take steps to increase the awareness of the general public of hound hunting by producing public service announcements for television, a brochure that goes out to every landowner with their tax information, or creating easements for hound hunting. Participants pointed out that coon hunters, unlike other hound hunters, typically do not belong to a club or lease land, they simply go where there is space. One participant recounted that his organization has had some success with enhancing public awareness.

“We had these orange signs printed up and put in all these little country stores down there and all different places that said ‘don’t shoot that dog’ and say, you know, if the dog comes on your land and is a problem call the game warden or call us, but please don’t shoot the dog....That’s helped some. We haven’t seen as much as there’s been in the past.”

Some hunting groups (e.g., bow hunters) have developed education and ethics programs that amount to a set of “best practices.” Do you think that is something that other hunters, including those who use hounds, should do?

Although they did not specifically say that a code of ethics is unnecessary, the participants responded by restating the need for better communication and education between hunters and the public, the VDGIF and hunters, and increased efforts by the VDGIF to promote hound hunting.

Participants went on to discuss, again, the need for the Study. They were concerned that the Study had been initiated because of the concerns of small landowners and also that the recent

Michael Vick scandal would be harmful to the hound hunting cause by giving the anti-hunters and animal rights interests a springboard for changing legislation. Participants were concerned that a minority of people who have problems will be able to change hound hunting for everyone.

Are there any other important questions that this group should discuss?

One participant suggested that someone should look at the economic impact of hound hunting as part of this effort, especially before any decisions are made.

Another participant restated the need to encourage other hunters to be as cooperative as they can. Others suggested stressing the positive contributions hound hunters make to their communities. Another participant noted that landowners need to understand that all hunters are not the same.

SUMMARY

Overall, participants in this focus group were extremely passionate and dedicated to 'coon hound hunting. Most were life-long 'coon hunters who annually commit significant time and financial resources to the activity. Participants enjoy 'coon hunting for the fellowship, relaxation, and time in the woods. Participants believe that issues related to hound hunting in Virginia stem from changes in landownership in rural parts of the state where large tracts are being fragmented into smaller lots and people unfamiliar or unsupportive of hunting are moving into rural places. Participants also believed that big game hunter complaints about hounds may be an issue. Consistently, participants stated that increased education and awareness for hound hunters (especially the minority that cause problems), landowners, and other hunters is an important strategy for addressing issues related to hound hunting. Overall, participants seemed concerned that this Study is being conducted.